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CHANGING MINDS ABOUT CLIMATE POLICY CAN BE DONE - SOMETIMES



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Simply communicating the benefits is not enough



COLUMBUS, Ohio – Some open-minded people can be swayed to support government intervention on climate change – but only if they are presented with both the benefits and the costs, a new study suggests.

Researchers found that those who were open-minded didn't change their view if they heard arguments for only one side of the issue.

People who are relatively more closed-minded did not change their mind regardless of the messages they received, or what their original views were. There was also no evidence of open-minded people becoming less supportive of government intervention, no matter if they heard both sides of the argument or only one.

"Climate change is such a polarizing issue that has received so much attention, so it is very difficult to influence people to change their opinion," said Mershon affiliate **Erik Nisbet**, co-author of the study and assistant professor of communication at The Ohio State University. "But our results suggest there are ways to approach the issue that may have some impact, at least for a segment of the public."

The study appears online in the *Journal of Communication* and will be published in a future print edition.

The study involved a nationally representative sample of people who participated online. First, participants filled out a questionnaire asking a variety of questions and seeing where they stood on government intervention in climate change.

Four weeks later, the participants watched either one or two short videos that took sides on whether the government should take action to reduce the effects of climate change. Some saw only a video for or against government action, while others saw both pro and con videos. (See the videos [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).)

"In the real world, people are getting multiple competing messages on all kinds of important issues. We wanted to have an experiment where we could compare people who are exposed to one side of an argument to those who saw two sides in our videos," Nisbet said.

But it is not just the messages themselves that determine people's attitudes. Nisbet and his colleagues also measured a key individual difference in people – how open- or closed-minded they are when grappling with an issue like climate change.

The researchers used several questions from an often-used and validated psychological test to determine open-mindedness. Participants were asked how much they agreed with statements like "Even after I have made up my mind about something, I am always eager to consider a different opinion."

After viewing either one or two videos, the participants were asked again – as they were four weeks earlier – about their views on government intervention on climate change.

Nisbet said it wasn't surprising that there wasn't much change in most people's views on the issue. But there was that interesting interaction in which open-minded people became more supportive of government intervention – if they saw videos both for and against intervention.

"I think a lot of people would expect seeing both the pro and con videos would leave viewers unchanged in their views, because the messages would cancel each other out," Nisbet said. "But that wasn't true for open-minded people. Seeing both videos

seemed to stimulate them to think more about both sides of the issue, and lead them to the side they thought had the better argument.”

The results suggest that climate change denialists may be less effective in swaying public opinion than many scientists and advocates fear, and may even hurt their own cause among those who are most open-minded, according to Nisbet.

“Some people, when they hear both sides, will more carefully deliberate the tradeoffs of climate change policies and actually become more supportive of government efforts to mitigate the problem.”

However, some findings of the study suggest changing the minds of closed-minded people may not be hopeless, Nisbet said. The researchers asked participants how they viewed the costs versus the benefits of government action on climate change, both before and after they watched the video or videos.

The results showed that open-minded people are willing to consider the benefits of changing the status quo, while closed-minded people focus on the dangers of changing and were more likely to support maintaining the status quo.

This suggests that closed-minded people may be influenced by messages that focus on how government approaches to climate change may preserve the status quo by, for instance, protecting our lifestyle or nation’s economic status.

“That approach still needs to be tested, but there is promise there,” he said.

Nisbet conducted the study with P.S. Hart of American University, Teresa Myers of George Mason University and Morgan Ellithorpe of Ohio State. The research was supported in part by the National Science Foundation and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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